

Any Port in a Storm: The Roach

by Robert Roach

"I don't give a damn! He's gotten too big! He's gotta go down—and I say now! I know the scum. I've seen inside his mind. He's spread too thin and right now he's vulnerable. If we're ever gonna plant him, now's the time. There ain't never gonna be a better opportunity."

"But how, boss? We got good boys—good enough fer our needs—but to go after him, they'd be bitin' off more than they can chew. Maybe we can turn him. Maybe he just needs more time."

"I'm tired a' waitin'! He buys it and he buys it now!"

"Yeah, boss, but maybe with more time he'll—"

"What did I just say?!!" the large, heavy-set Sicilian man demanded, punctuating his query with a solid backhand across his objector's face. "If our boys can't do it, then pass me the phone. My word counts for something in this city. Bugs' gang has as much ta' gain and lose in this as we do. So does Jimmie's. If our boys ain't enough, we'll git enough fer a' army."

"I don't think the boys'd like workin' with Bugs' boys much. 'Er any other gang. It's a matter a' pride. I don't think they'd like ta go along."

"They'd like it lots less ta be floatin' feet up in the lake and that's what they'll be doin' if I hear one damned thing. And that's a promise."

"You chicken-livered whores got anything else to cry about? You all still afraid of your shadows? Since Al went up the river, I've run this town and I've decided. It's time fer the Roach to die!"

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Frank Nitty's business council broke up that Thursday afternoon after he'd made calls to other key gangland leaders. And, though many initially resisted, all gave in to his pleas, negotiations or threats as each individual case demanded. He'd assembled roughly 100 men to do his dirty work. The Roach would be dead by Sunday morning.

Nitty felt quite pleased with himself and everyone around him could tell. As the men filed out, another figure caught Frank's eye. With a sly, lustful grin plastered on his mug, he motioned the winsome young lady into the room. Nor was she slow to respond. The girl had been a streetwalker—some would have said that though she'd changed locales, she was still a hooker. Such thoughts weren't terribly important. What was paramount was that she'd risen in life because she was Frank Nitty's toy. So, whether or not she enjoyed his caress, she made sure the crime boss was ecstatic over her touch. And he was. So much so that Nitty often spoke to her during the throes of passion about extremely confidential matters. And in the midst of that particular "Matinee," Frank was true to design.

Thursday afternoon faded into Thursday night, and all on Chicago's South Side was as calm as it ever was. The night shift—legal, illegal, moral and immoral—went to work. And, walking on an errand in the midst of that human flotsam and jetsam was the winsome young woman. As she passed a

darkened doorway she heard a feminine gasp and felt a light touch on her shoulder. Turning on a dime, she looked into an attractive face.

"Cybil!" the mistress exclaimed as she gazed at the black girl's features.

"Girl, what're you doin' down in these parts?!" Cybil asked with a smile. "Last I heard you'd hit the big time and the easy life."

"Yeah, I really can't complain. I get treated fine. No more streetwalkin'—at least not till Nitty gets tired of me. And I do my best to see that he don't get tired. Even though the bum's gotta be one of the world's all-time lousiest lays." Both ladies laughed at that juncture.

"But bein' with Frank ain't so bad. He hardly slaps me around and he's usually at his war councils or whatever, so I'm left to myself."

"Yeah," Cybil concurred, "it does seem as though he'd have to spend a lotta time tendin' to business."

"You know it, girl. In fact, today—now you can't say a word of this to **anyone** else." The black hooker nodded her head. "Well, today, Frank commissioned his boys to rub out the Roach! Can you believe it?!"

Cybil's face reflected her skepticism.

"I don't think Frank's men can cancel out the Roach."

"But it won't just be Frank's boys. He talked to a bunch of other bosses and got the best of their boys all together in an army to go after the Roach. Isn't that wild?!"

Cybil didn't talk much the remainder of the conversation and Frank's tack-head carried their talk into other areas. Finally, all talked out, the two parted company wishing each other well. Cybil knew what she had to do. Her mind was made up. And so the lovely lady-of-the-evening made a bee-line for Comiskey. In a rarity of note, the White Sox had won a game, and happy fans made good "johns." Especially happy—usually inebriated—White Sox fans.

Amassing information as she traveled, she swiftly found the one she was looking for: Sadie. As quickly as she could, Cybil filled Sadie's ears with that awful news. And, though she did a good job masking her feelings, Cybil could tell that Sadie's heart, in addition to her head, was filled with evil forebodings.

"Thanks for coming and telling me this, Cybil," Sadie said as her mind ran in circles a mile a minute.

"It's okay, girl," she responded. "After all the Roach did for Spat and Rhinestone, I owe him a helluva lot more than this."

"I've gotta go find him!" Sadie exclaimed.

"Go and find him," Cybil said, understanding what her friend couldn't say. "Make him leave town or somethin'. 'Cause it hurts too much to lose your man." And with that the black lady melted into the night with only the fading sound of her clicking heels left to signify that she'd been there.

Sadie whistled over a taxi and hopped in.

"Where to, toots?" the cabby asked in his most macho voice.

"I don't know," Sadie responded, for in truth there was no way to tell exactly where the Roach was at that moment.

"How about my place?" the cabby offered, flashing the most seductive smile he could muster. Sadie merely ignored him.

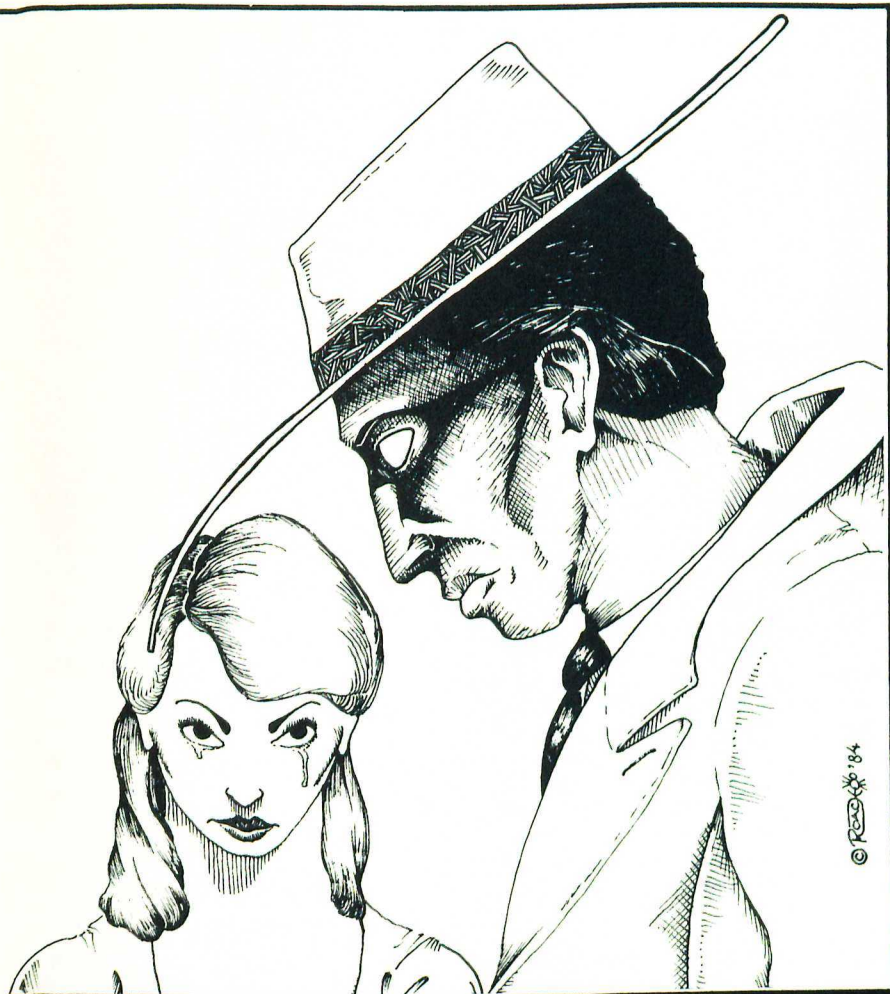
"South," she finally announced. "Go south on State until I ask you to turn."

"Is this gonna be cash or compensation?" the cabby asked, reaching back to stroke her thigh.

Like lightning, a four-inch blade appeared in Sadie's hand and was pressed uncomfortably next to the jerk's Adam's apple.

"Keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the road," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Or I'll introduce your balls to your toes. Now drive!"

Following her instincts, Sadie rode in the cab to the 4700th block of



Cottage Grove. After paying her fare—without a tip—she stepped from the car, wondering how in the world she would find her elusive masked lover.

Just then three shots rang out from the midst of Washington Park.

Sadie raced toward the sounds, hoping her instincts hadn't steered her wrong. After running through the autumnal verdure for a couple of minutes, she came upon three still forms. She knew the men were dead—when he aimed to kill he didn't miss.

"Some assholes," she suddenly heard a deep, masculine voice state. "Two young kids—not more than eighteen—decided for a romantic walk in the park," the voice continued. "Next time they'll be smarter. They'll pick a better time or a more lighted place. They're damn lucky they have a next time."

"The punks caught 'em out here alone and decided they wanted the

money. Then they decided they wanted a little nookie. Then, for the fun of it, they'd off the boy. Were they wrong!

"Oh! Pardon my manners. Good evening, Sadie. How are you and what brings you out here?"

"They want you dead," the hooker said.

"Who is 'they?' "

"Most of the bosses. They got together around a hundred men between them. They're supposed to bring in your mask and your hat by Sunday morning."

The Roach became gravely silent.

"What are you gonna do?"

"There's only one thing to do," he replied, the steel in his voice unyielding.

"No!" Sadie exclaimed, her voice overflowing with passion. "There are a lot of things you can do. You can hide out for a while—no one would find you. Or you can leave town."

The Roach smiled his familiar smile and shook his head.

"Why not?!"

"You know why," he said in a hushed voice.

"No! Why not?!" she demanded.

"I've never been that kind of man. Run? We know that if I don't I'll probably die. The odds don't seem to be in my favor. If I do hide or run—if I duck these scum—I'll live. But my soul, whatever makes me a man, will die. And in the truest sense my life would be over."

"Please," Sadie begged, her fears rolling down her face in liquid form.

The Roach took her face in his hands and stared into Sadie's attractive features. And as she peered back through her tears she was perplexed. On his face she didn't see anxiety or fear—not a trace of either. But she did see understanding, care and other emotions she couldn't define.

He drew her lips close to his until they touched. And there they stayed for a passionate, lingering kiss—perhaps their last kiss to share.

Then, drawing away from her and into the shadows, he all but disappeared. Still in sight were the tip of his fedora, a shoulder and half his face. And, turning, he looked at her once more.

"I love you, Sadie," he said, and then was gone without a sound.

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The street erupted in a ball of crimson fury and for a moment daylight made a personal visit to 47th and Indiana. Winos scurried for more peaceful gutters and the late-night blacks rushed for safe haven at the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments. Inside of thirty seconds the intersection was void of inhabitants. Save six forms, five of them lying still, as pieces of what had been their car burned with abandon.

"Damn it!" the animated form swore under his breath. He didn't mean to kill all of them. He needed information—information corpses could rarely give.

The shadowy warrior rushed through the wee hours of that Saturday morning to see if his luck would improve and if one of the slimes wasn't quite dead.

As he moved toward the men, his memories of three hours earlier came back. Midnight in the Windy City. He'd been on Hyde Park Blvd., again looking for pieces to his life or death puzzle. There, a group similar to this five man gang located him. Being on foot and five-to-one odds made the masked man think. The Roach didn't mind the stick's short end, but he was set

firmly against suicide.

Fortunately, Jackson Park was a quick pitch away. Unfortunately, a bullet could travel faster than a rock, so the Roach let his leather fly. And, just as he dove behind a tree, he heard the lead spray around him and off the life-saving bark.

He had no chance against all of them under those circumstances, and less than that if the fight drew long. The car was coming around for a second pass. The Roach had six bullets in his gun. The move he conceived was daring—but his best, and only, shot.

The Roach barrel-rolled free of the tree. Though one of the hoods leveled his tommy gun at the dapper detective, the Roach squeezed off his shot first. The Ford's left front tire exploded, turning the car over and flipping the men out of the convertible. But, though the action was furious, the happenings seemed in slow motion to the Roach's eye and mind. He sighted one man as the rat flew through the air. The Roach put a bullet in his brain. He also eliminated the guy with the tommy gun—both before they touched the ground. A third soul fell to Hell before the car stopped rolling. A fourth man was able to take a wild shot at the Roach. He missed. The Roach didn't. And the last man was crushed by the automobile.

His mind refocused on the task at hand. Three of the thugs that the Roach checked were dead. A fourth would die but hadn't quite succumbed. He coughed up a mass of gore and moaned. The Roach shook him by the shoulders.

"Hey!" the death dealer called into the dying man's ear.

He coughed up more blood, moaned and opened his eyes. The man didn't see the sharp, handsome lines of the Roach's face. He didn't feel his life's liquid force oozing slowly out. What he did see—what he was reliving—was a figure dressed in a pin-stripe suit, trench coat and a fedora running away from the car he drove. What he felt was the thrill of the chase and the exultation of apparent triumph, then surprise as their quarry stopped dead in his tracks. That, followed by shock—and fear, as what seemed to be a green pineapple lobbed from the prey's grasp and nestled in the car. And then all he remembered were the searing flames, the deafening roars and the pain-splashed red.

"Hey!" the Roach repeated, again shaking the scum.

The clouds rolled out of the gangster's eyes, and, for a moment, the man put the immediate past out of his mind.

"What, asshole?" he demanded, sputtering blood as he spoke.

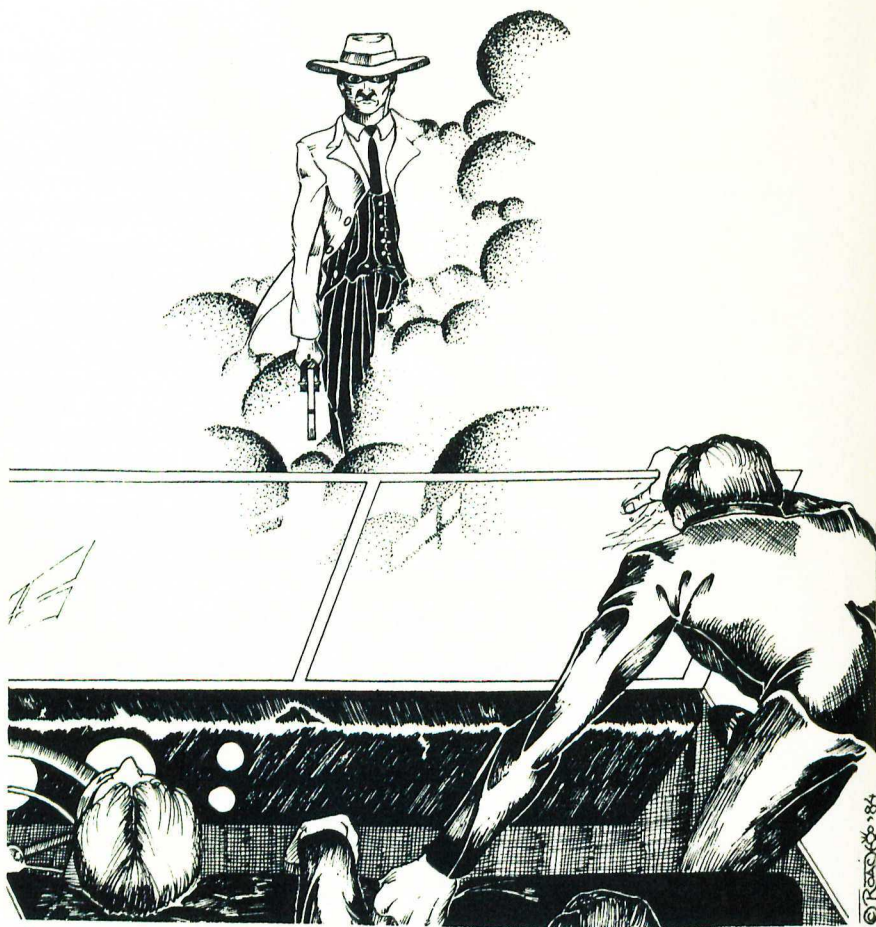
"You know what," the harbinger responded.

"Yer gonna go down. Even now," cough, "every time you make a hit, every time you score, the rest of the boys squeeze in on you from all directions. Yer gonna die." The trigger man's body was racked with violent coughs and spasms. Then he grew still, his eyes staring into nothingness.

But, as if to make his last words prophetic, the report of a pistol shattered the air. And the Roach felt the cold heat of lead ripping through his left thigh. Wheeling in the direction of some nearby buildings, the crimefighter ran-limped toward the temporary sanctuary. Before he ducked behind the corner of a wall his own gun spoke, downing two of the assassins.

The Roach moved toward the north. The bullet had passed through his leg so he didn't fear its lodging in a more inopportune place. It was merely a nuisance. What could become a deadly nuisance.

He knew, that since the jackals smelled blood, the hunt would intensify. And, wounded, his chances looked that much slimmer. But surrender never crossed his mind.



The Roach was thinking clearly and coolly. He needed to break through their ranks—get outside their ominous ring. Once outside he could have more success defending himself. He paused next to Bauman's Delicatessen to catch his breath. Since he was headed north, there was no reason for him to alter his course, and no reason for him to break through the ranks at that moment. Dawn would soon wake the city, and daylight would hamper the assassins' effectiveness. Their impunity would become more suspect. All the Roach needed was a safe place to rest and heal as best he could. For him that would be no problem. And he didn't foresee any apprehension his disappearance would cause his hunters. They had drawn blood and had him surrounded. They could be patient. So, with no misgivings, the Roach found his spot and within minutes was drifting off to sleep.

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Dusk had passed and neon fought to disperse the darkness of that Saturday evening. In the shadow of a shadow sat a lean, powerful figure. The

Roach had stopped the bleeding of his thigh and bandaged the wound to give his leg more support. But he was pissed off. A perfectly good pair of pants were ruined. He'd never get the blood stains out.

As closely as he could guesstimate, ninety-plus men still cruised the South Side looking for him. His plans were made. His jaw was set. It was time to live or die.

The Roach made a brief stop at one of his nearby munitions caches. He figured he'd need the weapons. This was war.

He made it all the way up to 35th and Prairie before he encountered another hit squad. Fortunately he'd seen them first. Half a block away was a dead end alley formed by numerous buildings. The assholes were a couple of blocks down the road. The only question left was, in his condition, could he lure them into the cul-de-sac before a bullet exploded in his spine?

With a grim smile on his face, the Roach leaped into the middle of the street. Hearing the surprised shouts behind him, he ran away with a pronounced limp. Thirty yards more—twenty yards—ten! He felt the breeze of a bullet by his cheek and its whistling in his ear. And then he rounded the corner of the alley.

"It's a dead end!" one of the jerks screeched with joy as the Roach ducked into the by-way. "Step on it, Leo!"

The Buick took the corner at a perilous speed. It bounced its lights off the alley's back wall. The Roach was gone.

"What the hell?!" one hood exclaimed. "Where the fuck is he?!"

Just then a shot rang out; a man screamed, and fell over dead.

"What's goin' on h--?!" another thug started. A bullet through his throat cut his query short.

The remaining hoods looked about with wild eyes. They saw nothing to shoot at.

"Move this tub, Leo!" a survivor shouted.

Leo put the car into gear. Leo looked over his left shoulder to back out of the alley. Then, Leo died.

Panicking, the last two assassins tried to leap from the moving car but the buildings on either side prevented that form of retreat. One man tried to jump from the hood as the car backed into the street. He died in the air.

"Damn you!" the last man howled, shooting blindly at any and everything. The shadows in front of him parted. Out stepped a tall, well dressed man with a slight limp. Slowly, deliberately, he raised what seemed, to the gangster's imagination, to be a cannon and leveled the gun at the man's chest. With abandon, the hired killer yanked at his trigger. The chambers were empty.

"Goodbye," the Roach said. And, as swiftly, he was the only living person in the street.

He checked Leo's watch. 11:45 it reported. The Roach dumped the car's garbage onto the pavement. He smiled, wondering if he'd be fined for littering. And then the masked avenger hopped into the car, put it into gear and drove on at an unassuming pace.

A squad camped out at Victory Monument so he couldn't go down 35th to reach the lake. So he decided to bide the little time left to him, and wait for an hour or so until the hitmen would unknowingly open up a lane for him to slip through. He eased back and relaxed, fully intending to let Chronos race.

The Roach roused himself. It was 1:00 a.m. Sunday morning; due date for his head. He was sure the search for him would become more kinetic. Maybe by now the men had moved. Unfortunately not. He couldn't just sit in hiding any longer—he would become the proverbial duck. It was once again time to do or die.

He eased the Buick out of its hiding place and proceeded north. Zig-zagging a circuitous route, he avoided all signs of his assassins for a half an hour. Then all hell broke loose.

Suddenly three cars were on his tail. He had been right—the deadline had intensified the search for him.

Flying like the wind, the Buick tore up Michigan Ave. as the mobsters pressed their advantage. Bullets rained in a thunderstorm of destruction. The vanity of the killers undermined their effectiveness, nonetheless. Had one paused to shoot out the Roach's tires, he would have been at their mercy. Instead they all went for the clean kill. Everyone wanted to be the man to kill the Roach. And, unwittingly, they played into his hands.

The Roach continued up Michigan, by-passing the downtown sights with no conscious thought. Only one thing kept rolling over in his mind: If I can make it to Monroe St. I have a chance. The high-speed chase glued two more hit squads onto the Roach's tail. But he paid them no more mind than he did the other three cars. What did it matter that ten more hoods joined the chase? If they caught him those ten wouldn't make the difference in the outcome—he'd still be dead. But if he could make it to Monroe he'd have a slight chance. At least he'd be able to take as many of them with him as he could.

His windshield was gone, and the Roach was forced to drive by periodically peeking over the dash board lest a well aimed bullet find its mark. Jackson Blvd. went by. Then Adams. And then, without apparently decreasing his speed, the Roach took a right onto Monroe. He crossed Columbus Drive and suddenly he heard an untimely explosion. One of the hoods had wised up and shot out one of the Roach's back tires. As the car lurched, beginning its death roll, the Roach sprang free of the tumbling vehicle. He landed with a thud on the northern grasses of Grant Park. The shadowy detective quickly rolled over and returned the favor—planting a bullet in the first car's gas tank. Five fewer assholes to deal with.

The Roach then wasted no time scrambling across the intervening road, trying to reach the lake. He wasted no time because he knew his vulnerability would make him a hot target. Nor was he wrong. Bullets sang about him as he crossed that impromptu no-man's land.

"Wait a second!" one hood shouted at all the others, "Let's call all the other boys in off the streets. We got the fucker cornered so's he can't get away. Why should we take them unnecessary chances. Let's git everybody together and gun 'im down clean and proper-like." Everyone seemed to approve, so the low-lives waited about twenty minutes for the rest of the army to arrive. And, to make it easier to relocate the Roach, they fired occasionally on his lakefront position in order to keep him pinned down.

Then they attacked. Like a pack of crazed hyenas after a wounded lion, the mobsters descended on the Roach . . . or where they thought he was.

"I thought he was here?!" one befuddled hood shouted. "No!" another screamed, looking about a hundred yards up the shore, "there he is!"

Running north of the gangsters' position, the Roach labored on. His wounded leg was slowing him down and the physical pressures of the preceeding two days were beginning to tell on him. As he passed the Columbia Yacht Club, he knew he needed more time. Just a moment of confusion among their howling ranks. As he thought, his hand found a hard, oval-shaped object in his pocket. He didn't want to use it. His supply was running low and if he was going to escape with his skin he'd need them later on. But if something didn't happen to shake the assassins up, there'd be no later on. Already they were getting his range. He took the pull ring in his teeth, yanked it loose and lobbed another grenade among the mobsters. Its

eruption took out twenty more men and threw the lot of them into utter disorder.

The Roach reached the shipping area north of the park's recreational area before the killers could again take up the trail. Without restraint, he began digging in the soil. He dug with such ferocity that inside of a minute he had a hole three feet deep and five feet across. Into this he poured out everything in his coat, save his gun and enough bullets for one round. By chance, he happened to glance at the ship whose shadow he was using as cover. Upon identifying its cargo, he smiled. Surely Providence was giving him a fair chance at his life. And that's all he ever asked for.

As he rushed away from that point where the river met the lake, he heard sounds of the renewed pursuit. They seemed to be coming faster than ever. Evidently his tracks weren't hard to follow.

"There he is!" one shouted as he squeezed off a shot. The Roach fell backwards as his left shoulder exploded in pain. He'd come too far to give in. So, the grim returner of death scrambled to his feet and ran back toward his hole.

"I hit him! I hit him!" the jubilant scum sang as the gang continued to dog their prey's trail.

The Roach's lungs burned as if the bellows of hell blew brimstone down his throat. His step was unsteady, but the river was just seconds away. With gunfire again bursting about him, he dove into the dank, dirty waters of the Chicago River. A minute passed. Then two. And nothing but silence and still water greeted the gangsters' vigilance.

"Do you think he's dead?" one asked another.

"He's gotta be. Nobody could stay under like that—especially with the holes he's got in 'im, not to mention his coat and his suit."

A grim smile came to the Roach's face as he listened to the assassins. Though it was next to death sharing that dark, damp hold with the fierce Chicago river rats, he hadn't quite succumbed. And, as the vermin nipped at his hands and feet, he really couldn't complain. Any landing you could walk away from, as the saying went. Any port in a storm.

The two-legged rats weren't quite where he wanted them. And it didn't seem as though they'd move in that direction without stimulus—namely him.

Cautiously, the Roach rose from his hiding place. Gingerly, he stepped from the shadows. Between him and them was his hole. He again smiled, thinking that at least his life hadn't been dull.

"Hey, assholes!" he shouted at them as he shot one man in the chest.

The mobsters surged toward him, shooting as they ran. Just a little nearer, the Roach thought. Just a hair closer to the boat. The night-time marauder shot another man as the pack drew even closer, screaming vile epithets as they ran. Suddenly, the Roach felt more searing lead rip through the right side of his stomach. Simultaneously, he pulled off a shot—one not directed at the men but at the feet of the front runners, at his hole in the ground.

Immediately, the explosives he'd planted blew. Concussion after concussion tore through the ranks. And as the dying men screamed, a more deafening roll of thunder shook the shore. The boat next to the Roach's trap went up in a fireball, the munitions that comprised its store joining those of the Roach in destroying the gangsters' ranks.

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Frank Nitty smiled as he spoke on the phone.

"Yeah?!" he responded. "No one left alive, right?" The voice on the other

end concurred, but cautioned the crime lord that all the corpses hadn't been identified.

"How about the Roach? Have you found him? Anything? His hat, his coat, his mask? No? Okay, keep lookin'. Yeah, you'd better get back with the other coppers 'er else they might start puttin' two and two together. Ya' earned this month's pay-off, buddy-boy!"

Nitty hung up the phone with a malicious grin on his face. Nobody left alive. That included the Roach. Regardless how good a good guy the Roach was, even he couldn't have eluded that carnage.

Frank walked back toward his bedroom, still smiling, still thinking about the Roach. Funny, he suddenly thought, the floor hadn't been wet when he answered the phone. Nor had the window been open. With the icy finger of dread playing along his spine, Nitty spun about. There, in the room's densest shadows, a cigarette glowed.

"Good evening, Frank," the grave voice said.

Nitty's mouth was glued shut by fear.

"I didn't want to disturb your phone conversation so I let myself in. One of your police stoolies? Did he tell you what happened up around the park? Did he tell you that I'm dead?"

"I guess this is where I buy it," Nitty said, his voice finally unthawing.

"No, Frank," the Roach began, "this isn't where you buy it. You know your role in this world of ours, and I know mine. Plus, we both know each other's. With the right relationship—the proper degree of understanding and respect—you're right where I want you to be. I don't want you dead. Not yet. But this weekend has at least shown both of us that when I do want you six feet under, there's nothing you can do to stop me. I'll be in touch."

Suddenly, the cigarette went out and the Roach was gone.

Through the Window

by J. Keith Graybill

Through the window
a bird devastates bread crumbs
by peck, peck, peck.
Winds of woosh and trees of creaks
prevail.
Snow falls and falls
and keeps falling,
until all is covered.

Within,
a spider spins a silent web,
near the portrait of an idle dance.
Silence speaks;
accompanying the onlooking aged
waiting to be covered.